



Carolina Salguero (l.), director of PortSide NewYork, with performer Zurab Ninua (c.) and performer and founder Judith Barnes on board oil tanker at Pier 9 in Red Hook yesterday. Photo by John Tracy

Oil's well for Puccini opera up on a tanker in Red Hook

BY RACHEL MONAHAN
DAILY NEWS WRITER

A BROOKLYN-based opera company has chosen a uniquely gritty venue for its next production — atop a retired oil tanker moored at a working dock in Red Hook.

The Vertical Player Repertory has scheduled four performances of Puccini's "Il Tabarro" ("The Cloak") in September, said the opera company's founder, who also plans to hire local longshoremen as onstage extras.

"I'm excited that it's a working port rather than some pretty boat in a touristy area," said Judith Barnes, a performer and founder of the Cobble Hill-based opera company.

"There's something there that reminds people that this opera is about people who make their living from the waterfront," Barnes said of Puccini's tale of tragic love, set on a barge on the River Seine in Paris.

This adaptation is set in Brooklyn during the middle of the last century and will be performed on the deck of the 172-foot-long Mary A. Whalen, a former tanker that is being converted into a floating museum.

"It's an opera, which sounds like a high-culture thing, but it's about life on a barge. So it's pretty exciting for us, because it's . . . a great fusion," said Carolina Salguero, director of Port-

Side NewYork, a waterfront cultural group that acquired the 69-year-old ship last year.

Since then, American Stevedoring, a major port operator, has provided a berth on Pier 9.

"The use of our dock and this tanker to create a cultural space is an excellent example of how industry and community can co-exist in Brooklyn — and how we can use the waterfront to its full potential," said Evan Thies, a spokesman for the port operator.

Each of the four performances — at sunset for two Fridays and two Sundays beginning Sept. 7 — will accommodate up to 400 audience members.

Barnes, who once performed in a stone quarry in Indiana, has contemplated other unique urban venues — an air shaft for a Handel opera, perhaps. But this will be the first unorthodox setting for one of the company's operas — not counting its home base on Court St., a former factory with vaulted ceilings.

"There will be the constant sense [that] this is where things really happened, [or] this could have happened here at some point," Barnes said of the reality afforded by the Red Hook backdrop.

"For opera, the big question is always how does it sound, and that we'll still be determining as we go forward with the production. The acoustics seem pretty good," she added.

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